

NO. 165.

THE
IMPORTANCE OF DISTINGUISHING
BETWEEN
TRUE AND FALSE CONVERSIONS.



The only sure means to prevent fatal deception is to try all our experiences by that infallible standard, *the Word of God*.

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EXCELLENT treatises have been written, with a view to enable us to distinguish between the wheat and the chaff in conversions and religious experiences. We have, however, no reason to expect that these will be read by people at large: and yet people at large are infinitely concerned in obtaining information on this interesting subject; for every man, and woman, and child, has a *soul* which must be for ever lost, except it be created anew after the image of God, in righteousness and *true holiness*. The frequency of awakenings at the present day, in connexion with the immense importance of correct views about a saving work of the Spirit, has suggested the propriety of there being written on the subject a small Tract, which can be put into the hands of all. If the subject cannot in this compass be handled thoroughly, still in this way a little light may be reflected into many minds.

In the outset, let the reader lay this to heart, that deception about our religious experience is *possible*. The apostle intimates, that a man may think himself to be something, when he is nothing, and so deceive himself. Gal. vi. 3. He cannot deceive God, but *himself* he may deceive; for "the heart is deceitful above all things." It is said in the Scripture, that the hope of the hypocrite shall perish; which supposes that some hypocrites are self-deceived, else they would have no hope to lose. Five of the ten virgins had lamps without oil; that is, they had hopes and profession without grace. In the parable of the sower, the seed which fell on stony places, and which sprang up without taking any root, represents a defective conversion. The joy, with which the word is said to have been received, be-speaks a hope of pardon; but it was a hope which made them ashamed.

From the Scriptures we learn, that there are those who trust in themselves that they are righteous, and from a conceit of their own superior goodness, despise others ; who, nevertheless, will in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. "There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes," (i. e. in their own conceit they are new creatures,) "and yet is not washed from their filthiness." Prov. xxx. 12. Let me entreat you, my dear Reader, to let this thought be fixed deep in your mind—that you may be deceived about the state of your own heart. I do not say that you are deceived, but it is a possible case : therefore examine yourself whether you be in the faith.

To be deceived with a false hope, as it is possible, so it is very *dreadful*. It is a deception which will prove ruinous to those who are labouring under it. It proved ruinous to the five foolish virgins, who seemed to have supposed, all the while that the bridegroom tarried, that they had oil in their vessels. They did not therefore think of applying for oil, until that the coming of the bridegroom made their destitute state manifest.

The whole of our fallen race are divided into two widely different classes, by the separating line of the *new birth*. Those who are on the one side of this line, are the friends of God, and those on the other side, are his enemies : those who are on the one side, are in the narrow way which leads to life ; while those on the other side, are in the broad way which leads to hell. Now, what a dreadful mistake it must be, for those who are on the wrong side of this separating line, to fancy themselves to be on the right side, and in the path to life, when there is but a step between them and eternal death. And there is no hope of their being turned out of this perilous road into the path of life, unless they can be convinced of the worthlessness of their religion. To effect this is no easy thing ; for their false religion is entirely to their taste. They have chosen their own delusions. Had the man who is deceived the same jealousy of his own heart which is natural to the true convert, there would be hope that he would find out his mistake. But it is not so ; for while he is wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, he fancies that he is rich, and increased in goods, and has need of nothing.

I have reason to expect, from the light of God's word,

that those of my readers who are most dreadfully deceived about their religion, will be the least apt to suspect themselves to be in this condition. As means to prevent being deceived about their conversion, let my readers attend to the following directions.

1. Do not rest in the good opinion which others entertain of your conversion. "Let every man prove his own work, then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another." Another cannot know with certainty that your heart is right with God. There is none but the searcher of hearts, and yourself, that can know with certainty the state of your heart. After Peter had called Silvanus (who was an eminent Christian minister) a *faithful* brother, he adds this qualifying clause, "*as I suppose.*" By this we are taught, that even an apostle did not pretend to know the hearts of others with an infallible certainty. If all the ministers, and all the Christians in the world, were to tell you that your conversion might be relied on, it would be unsafe, and wrong to give an implicit credit to their opinion. If your conversion be indeed genuine, you will not do it. You will prove your own work, and you will keep proving it.

2. It will be unsafe to judge of the goodness of your religion by its agreement with that of other men. They who, in these interesting concerns, "measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves amongst themselves, are not wise." 2 Cor. x. 12. Let us suppose this to be the way in which the stony ground hearers made trial of their conversions: One heard another relate his experiences, and they agreed with his own: and this led him to conclude that his own experiences were good, because they were so perfectly similar to his neighbour's. It is true, they were *similar*: but what did this avail, seeing their similarity consisted in their being shallow experiences, having no root to support them? I fear that thousands, and ten thousands are deceived, and for ever ruined in this way. And in this way we are more eminently exposed to be deceived, in those seasons of merciful visitation, when great numbers are religiously affected at the same time. At such times there are often many who entertain confident hopes of their regeneration, who have brought their feelings and views to no higher standard than to that of the

experiences which they have heard related by their neighbours.

It is an affecting thought; that there should be such multitudes under the light of God's holy word, who are full of hopes of heaven merely because *they* have felt as *others* have felt—they have had such distress of mind as they have heard others tell of, and they have been filled with such joys as others have experienced. But this is no sufficient evidence of a gracious state; for multitudes may receive the word anon with joy, even with the same kind and degree of joy, and yet none of them have any root in themselves. Matt. xii. 5, 6, 20, 21.

3. The only sure means to prevent fatal deception in this matter is, to try all our experiences by that infallible standard, *the word of God*. This is like silver seven times purified. It is everlasting truth. It will determine what is right, and what is wrong in our opinions, experiences, and practices. The *word* which I speak unto you, said the Saviour, the same shall judge you in the last day. *By the help of God's word we may anticipate the judgment of the great day, as it relates to ourselves.* If we have evidence that we now possess the religion approved of by the Bible, we have just so much evidence that our religion will stand the test of the great day; for Bible religion, and no other, will meet the approbation of the Judge.

You cannot know with infallible certainty, that your most religious neighbour is a real saint; but you know, with the same infallible certainty with which you do the truth of God's word, that Abraham, David, Paul, Peter, and John, and many others, were real saints. Therefore you may know, that if you have the same religious experiences which they had, your religion will bear the inspection of the great day. You are assured that Jesus Christ always did those things which pleased his Father; if, therefore, you have the spirit of Christ, and follow in his steps, you are in the path of life.

The Bible is all of it calculated to teach us the nature and effects of true religion. When it exhibits the holiness of God, we are not only presented with the great *object* of love, but also with the *pattern* for our imitation. All who are born of God resemble their Father, for they are

"partakers of the divine nature." In God's law we also learn what true religion is. The law which says, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbour as thyself, is true religion in *requirement*. When this law is written upon the heart, as it is by regenerating grace, then there is true religion in *experience*.

What, my Reader, have been your views of sin, and of your own sinful character in particular? The Holy Spirit reproves (or convinces) of sin. Those who are saved are all convinced of sin. The commandment comes, and sin revives in their view; they now see what they before heard, viz. that they are *sinners*. Now they know every man the plague of his own heart. The want of this previous conviction of depravity, is probably intimated by the premature growth of the seed which fell on stony places. It is represented as springing up too soon. There had been an alarm, but no deep conviction of sin. There is nothing more clearly revealed in the Bible, than the entire sinfulness of man's heart, and its total opposition to God. Natural men are called the *enemies* of God, and *haters* of God; and this is said concerning them all, without exception. See Rom. i. 30. v. 10. viii. 7.

I do not know into the hands of what particular persons this little piece will fall: but this I know; that it will fall into the hands of none but those who either are, or have been, *enemies* to God. And now, Reader, let me ask, Have you been made sensible of this enmity? If you have been renewed, you have undoubtedly seen that the whole of your unrenewed heart was contrary to God. This sight, given by the illumination of the Spirit, has led you to loathe yourself in your own eyes. The repentance which needeth not to be repented of, is a *godly* sorrow for sin. It is such a hatred of sin as the holy God possesses. If you have any godly sorrow for sin, you weep, not merely for the sake of being forgiven, but because you have sinned. You would sorrow if you thought you should never be forgiven; and you will not cease from sorrowing, when you have evidence that you are forgiven.

Much of the evidence of the genuineness of our experience, depends on our growing conviction of the evil of sin, and of the sinfulness of our own hearts in particular. As the holy influence of religion widens in the soul, sin will

be proportionably hated. This is the reason why eminent Scripture saints appear to be most deeply affected with their remaining depravity. See Job, xlvi. 1—6. and Rom. vii. 24. What saint in his day was superior to Job, and what Christian was ever more sanctified than Paul ; and yet who ever appeared more vile in their own sight, or more burthened with sin than they ? The man whose heart is changed, departs from iniquity ; he watches and prays, and strives against it ; but still he cries out, “Behold I am vile !” “O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death ?”

It is the work of the Spirit, not only to convince of sin, but also of *righteousness*. John, xvi. 8. Those who are truly taught by the teaching of the Holy Ghost, are first convinced that they are sinners, deserving evil, and nothing but evil, at the hand of God. They see that the tears of repentance do not atone for their sins. They see that no works of righteousness which they can do, will satisfy divine justice. The penitent is convinced that God is righteous ; that the law is righteous ; and that God must do nothing to cloud the evidence of his righteousness, or diminish respect for his law. This prepares his mind to be greatly delighted with the atonement of Christ. Here he sees justice and mercy met together. The righteousness of God declared, the law honoured, sin condemned, and the sinner pardoned. Reader, has the Father drawn you to the Son ; and have you, through the Son, come to the Father ? Is Christ, the Lord, *your* righteousness and strength ? Have you discovered an entire distinction between going about to establish your own righteousness, and submitting yourself to this righteousness of God ? Love to God exists in every renewed heart ; and this is no modification of selfishness ; it is a *disinterested* affection. If all we do in the service of God, be done singly with reference to ourselves, it is wholly unacceptable. If he be not delighted in, as a great, holy, and glorious being, we have in reality no interest in his favour.

As I am confined to such a narrow compass, I must pass over many important things untouched ; but I know not how to close my remarks without affectionately cautioning every one, into whose hands this little piece may fall, to be on his guard against a religion of his *own devising*, and

against depending on those as evidences of grace, which are of mere human invention. One man thinks he has experienced a change of heart, because he has had a remarkable dream. Another has seen a wonderful light; another has had a vision of the Saviour; another has heard a voice speaking to him; and another has had a Scripture promise immediately and unexpectedly suggested to his mind: like this, "Son be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee." Many are confident that they are converted, when they have no other evidence of it but such things as these. But where, I would ask, in all the word of God, are they taught that these are evidences of conversion? I know that, in the days of old, the Most High made revelations of his will by dreams, by visions, and by audible sounds; but these revelations are not now to be expected; nor were they then confined to his sanctified ones. The king of Egypt, and his chief butler and baker, had divine communications made to them in dreams, but this did not prove them to be any thing more than mere natural men. Balaam had visions of the Almighty; but he was a sinner still. These are never mentioned in the Bible as the things by which the men of grace obtain evidence of their gracious state. Carefully examine the experiences of the man after God's own heart, as they are contained in the book of Psalms, and you will find no *dreaming* experiences. His love to God's word on account of its purity, his delight in divine ordinances, and his respect unto all the commandments, are *his* evidences. Read Christ's Sermon on the Mount: it is a searching portion of Scripture. The religion which it inculcates must be *felt* and *practised* by us, or we are on the sand, and our building will fall. But what is the religion of the Sermon on the Mount? It is poorness of spirit, mourning for sin, hungering for righteousness, shining as lights in the world, loving and forgiving enemies, praying and giving alms, not from a spirit of ostentation, but from a spirit of devotion, a spirit of benevolence. This is a specimen of the religion taught in that noted sermon; yea, in all Christ's sermons. But there is not the least intimation that dreams and visionary appearances constitute any part of the religion of those whom the Saviour will own as his disciples. It is not intimated in any of the discourses of Christ, that if a man has a text of Scripture which contains

a promise, suggested to his mind, or whispered in his ear, or spoken in the air over his head, that this proves him to be born of God. How then, I would ask, comes it about, that so much dependance is made on these things? Christ has furnished us with a great variety of evidences of grace. These are overlooked, and evidences of our own making, or of mere human invention, are depended on. What folly can exceed this? To call strips of common paper banknotes, and sell our houses and lands for them, would not be folly comparable to it. There is religion, which is solid and substantial; which "changes all the heart," and makes it the residence of the sweet graces of the Spirit, and the principle of holy action. What is chaff to the wheat? What are dreams, and visions, in comparison to such religion as this? See 1st Cor. xiii. 1—7.

Satan practises his wiles about conversion with astonishing success. Some of those wiles (as I am led to view them) have fallen within my own observation.

A man advanced in life, who had obtained a hope thirty years before, told me his experience, which was in substance as follows: One night he was in great distress about his soul, so that when he turned over in his bed, it seemed to him like turning over in hell. Soon after this, he thought he saw a light come down through the roof, which rested upon his breast. When the cock crew, he thought it was the sweetest sound which he had ever heard. When he arose in the morning, the face of things was altered; for it seemed to him that every thing was praising God. I inquired of him for the fruits of this change, which had been of so long standing. I could not learn that he had ever had any stated worship in the family or closet; or that he made any conscience of sanctifying the Sabbath, even so much as to feel himself obliged to refrain from labour. Indeed, he appeared to be a total stranger to all the fruits of the Spirit. And yet (what is painful to relate) he seemed to have no doubt of the genuineness of his conversion; and could not be made to call it in question. Perhaps you may wish to ask me how I account for the new face which nature wore the morning after he saw that light; and how I account for the new language which it seemed to him to speak, even praise to God. I answer: The visionary light removed his fears, and excited a full

belief that God had delivered him from his state of condemnation. This was enough to make him feel very glad, very happy ; and to cause him for a while to abound in giving thanks to God. In this particular there was a resemblance of a true conversion ; but still it is easy to account for it on the principles of mere selfishness ; and what went before, and what followed these joyful feelings, are enough to convince us, that they could not be that joy in the Holy Ghost, which is peculiar to true converts.

I will now turn your attention to the case of a woman, who gave me an account of a hope which she had made dependance on for the term of eighteen years ; which for substance is as follows : "About that time," said she, "I lost a sister. This excited great distress in my mind, as I viewed myself unprepared for eternity. Eternity was an awful thought to me. The word kept ringing in my ears. One day, while I was thus distressed with the thoughts of eternity, as I threw myself on the bed, something seemed to say to me, 'Eternity is none too long to enjoy God and Christ.' This afforded me immediate relief." She, like a person drowning, caught at this straw, and on it she hung for eighteen years, when a merciful God was pleased to open her eyes to see that it was nothing but a straw. Do you ask me wherein this experience appears to be fallacious ? I answer, first, that there is no Scripture in favour of such an experience. I would add, that the experience appears to be wholly of the selfish kind. What preceded her relief was not conviction of sin ; it was nothing but terror. And her comfort did not arise from beholding the glory of the Lord, or any thing of the kind ; but merely from a belief that the eternity which she had dreaded would not be spent in misery, but in happiness. The holy enjoyments of heaven were not, as I could learn, taken into the account.

I am well acquainted with a man, who when he was awake, being in a state of distress of mind, thought he saw Christ reach down his arms to raise him up out of the gulph into which he fancied he was sinking. This he related to me soon after it took place, expecting that he should give me that joy which is occasioned by the repentance of a sinner. But the relation of it led me to make a new effort, in dependance on divine help, to res-

cue him from the snare of the devil. The Lord was merciful : a new and different experience succeeded, which produced a lasting conviction in the mind of the man, that the visionary discovery of Christ reaching down his arms, was not of the nature of a Christian experience.

I heard a young woman give a reason of her hope, who seemed to lay the greatest stress on this : that she awaked one morning with these words sounding in her ears : *Daughter, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee.* In this there were three things, which probably had influence in leading her to take up a hope. 1st. That the words contained a cheering promise, which being appropriated to her own case, implied that her sins were forgiven. 2d. These words came to her mind unexpectedly, and without any pains being taken on her part, which was probably one thing that led her to think they were sent like a direct message from God. 3d. The words gave the more consolation, as they were conceived to be the words of Scripture. To me, however, none of these reasons are sufficient to prove her conversion to be sound and saving. The devil knows *Scripture*, and can quote it. He can quote a *promise*, and can bring it *suddenly and unexpectedly* to the mind. For proof of all this, let me beg of you to read Matt. iv. 6. The Spirit of God makes us love the Scriptures because they are "*Holy Scriptures*," and the promises, because they are holy, and because by them we are made partakers of the divine nature ; but the devil seeks to comfort, with the promises, those whose hearts are not changed, and who have no preparation to be pleased with the promises of God's word, except by a selfish application of them. No sinner is pleased with eternal punishment, and therefore will be pleased with the promise of the forgiveness of sins, when he merely contemplates this as an escape from that punishment.

Satan is said to be transformed into an angel of light. It is his work to deceive and beguile, and thus to destroy souls. The several cases which I have stated, to me appear like the work of the Deceiver. If the relation of them should be the honoured means of breaking up or preventing *one false hope*, I shall not have cause to regret that I have put them on paper.

I beseech my reader not to lose his soul by such amazing folly as that of turning his back on the marks of grace laid down in the Scriptures, and trusting to those which have no Scriptural foundation. Will you not give me your word, before I leave you, that you will collect together all that in which you have trusted, and put it into the balance of the sanctuary, and see whether it has any real weight? If I saw you selling your estate for those worthless strips of paper, of which I spoke, I would caution you against doing so foolish a thing; but when I see you about to lose your soul by mistaking the wiles of the devil for Christian experiences, I know not how to hold my peace. I expect that some of you will think me officious; and think I had better take care of my own vineyard, and leave others to take care of theirs. The good will of my reader is not so much the thing that I seek, as the salvation of his precious soul. The command of God is, *to look diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God.* Those who are set to watch for souls, should watch, "as they that must give account."

My reader will bear with me while I add one more caution. Do not confine yourself to one particular mark of grace. If your conversion be the work of the Spirit, you will have *all* the marks of grace. One who is born of God, however feeble his strength, has all the members of a living and proper child. If you love the brethren with complacence, you will love enemies with good will. If you love God, whom you have not seen, you will love your brother whom you have seen. If your zeal is the fruit of the Spirit, you will, by the operation of the same Spirit, be also clothed with humility. If God prepare your heart to pray, he will also prepare you to every good word and work. And if he begin a good work in you, he will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ. If, therefore, you do not endure to the end, you lack an essential mark of a gracious state. Yea, I may add, if your conversion is the work of God's Holy Spirit, your religion will not be *stationary*; it will *advance*. You will go from strength to strength, until you appear before God in Zion.

This paper may fall into the hands of some who are not ignorant of Satan's devices. The prayers of such I would request in its behalf, that it may be the happy means of

delivering, at least one soul, from the snare of the fowler. Pray, my Christian friends, that this subtle deceiver, who has filled Christendom with his false and delusive conversions, may soon be chained, and not be suffered any longer to practise his wiles with such astonishing success.

SELF-EXAMINATION.

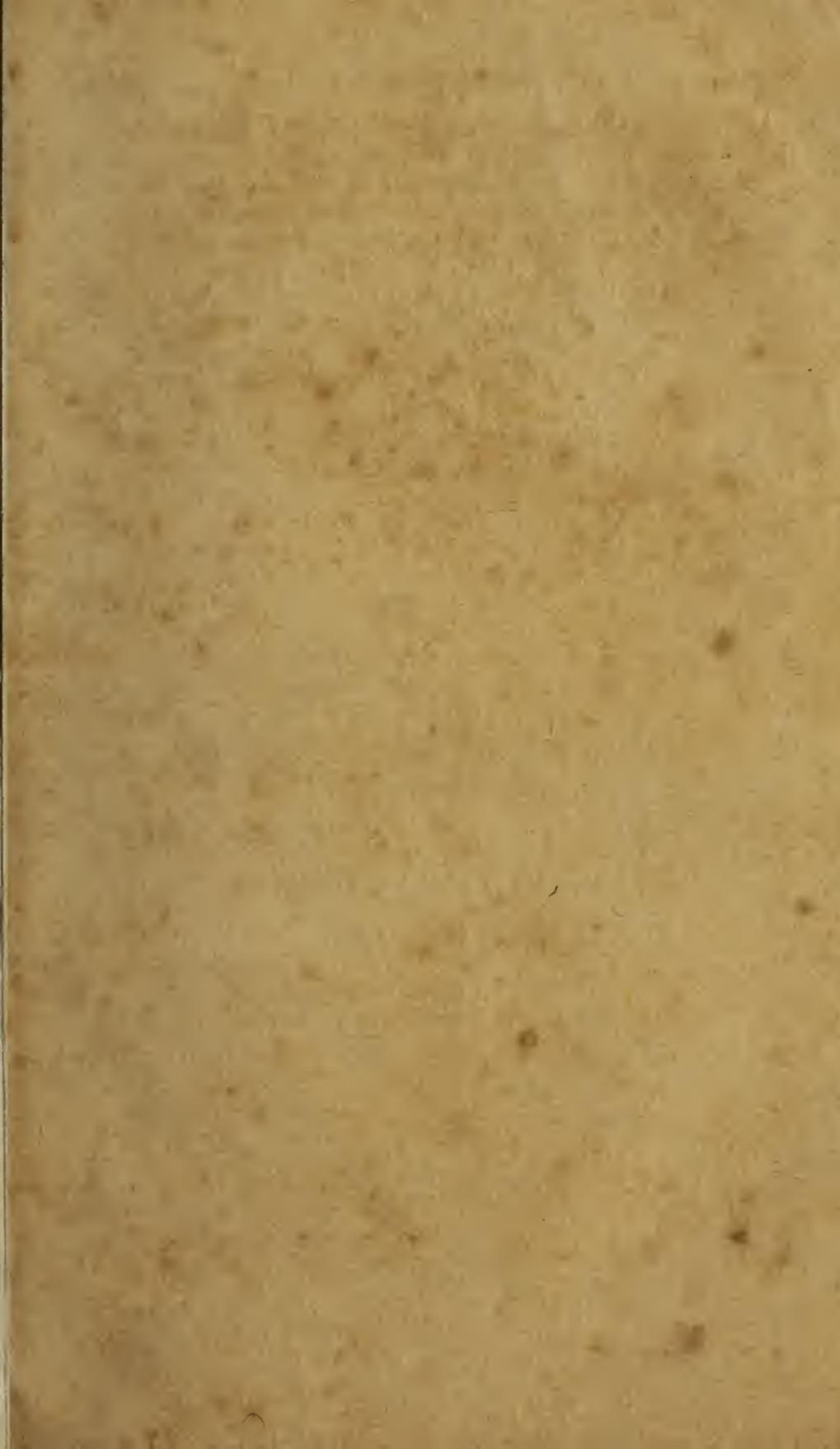
JUDGE me, O Lord, and prove my ways,
And try my reins, and try my heart;
My faith upon thy promise stays,
Nor from thy law my feet depart.

I hate to walk, I hate to sit,
With men of vanity and lies;
The scoffer and the hypocrite
Are the abhorrence of my eyes.

Amongst thy saints will I appear,
With hands well wash'd in innocence;
But when I stand before thy bar,
The blood of Christ is my defence.

I love thy habitation, Lord,
The temple where thine honours dwell;
There shall I hear thy holy word,
And there thy works of wonder tell.

Let not my soul be join'd at last
With men of treachery and blood,
Since I my days on earth have past
Among the saints, and near my God.



Zeal—True and False.

ZEAL is that pure and heav'ly flame
 The fire of love supplies ;
 While that which often bears the name,
 Is self, in a disguise.

True zeal is merciful and mild,
 Can pity and forbear ;
 The false is headstrong, fierce, and wild,
 And breathes revenge and war.

While zeal for truth the Christian warms,
 He knows the worth of peace :
 But self contends for names and forms,
 Its party to increase.

Zeal has attain'd its highest aim,
 Its end is satisfied,
 It sinners love the Saviour's name ;
 Nor seeks it aught beside.

But self, however well employ'd,
 Has its own ends in view ;
 And says, as boasting Jehu cried,
 " Come, see what I can do."

Dear Lord, the idol *self* dethrone,
 And from our hearts remove ;
 And let no zeal by us be shown,
 But that which springs from love.

NEWTON.

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